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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5758
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5682
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TAGS: PINS PREF PHUM KPAL SY

SUBJECT: UNWRA SAYS SARG RESTRAINING HAMAS EFFORTS TO
ORGANIZE PUBLIC PROTESTS OVER GAZA

REF: DAMASCUS 12

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly, American Embassy Damascus, Reasons 1
.4 b and d.

¶11. (C) UNWRA Country Director Panos Moumtzis (strictly protect) told us January 5 that tensions among Fatah and Gaza factions had increased dramatically in Syrian Palestinian refugee camps. Syrian security services had restrained Hamas leaders from organizing demonstrations and had beefed up security around the camps to maintain control. "They don't want a replay of Nahr al Bared here," Moumtzis commented. In October, the security forces had engaged in several armed exchanges with Fatah al-Islam elements inside the Yarmuk camp, and they have been on high alert since December 27 to prevent any militant extremists from exploiting the Gaza crisis to foment attacks within Syria, noted Moumtzis. The SARG had nixed HAMAS plans to organize a Palestinian "million man march," which had led to grumbling in many of the camps. Moumtzis added that factional tensions had spilled over to his own Palestinian staff.

¶12. (C) Meanwhile, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent would be launching its own appeal for humanitarian assistance for Gaza, Moumtzis reported. Moumtzis said Syrian assistance, like all international aid, was trickling into Gaza slowly. CNN had filmed a couple of trucks ferrying Syrian supplies (with Jordanian license plates) entering Gaza the previous day.

¶13. (C) Comment: Up to now, the security forces have allowed some demonstrations in a few of the major camps, but most of the protests elsewhere have been limited to Syrian students, trade unions, and civil servants. As noted in reftel, Syrian tolerance of large-scale Palestinian participation in public protests would signal the SARG's willingness to live with the risk of crowds that may spin out of control.
CONNELLY